

TESTIMONY OF JOAQUIN F. OTERO
ON BEHALF OF
THE RAILWAY LABOR EXECUTIVES' ASSOCIATION
BEFORE THE
SENATE LABOR AND PUBLIC WELFARE COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON LABOR

April 26, 1968

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Joaquin F. Otero. I am appearing today on behalf of the Railway Labor Executives' Association, with headquarters at 400 First Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. This association speaks for 23 standard railway labor organizations representing nearly all of the Nation's railroad employees. A list of the RLEA affiliates is attached to the end of my statement. My testimony is in support of Senate bill S. 1779 pertaining to the establishment of an independent agency of the U. S. Government to be known as the International Health, Education and Labor Foundation.

Since July 1966 I have been employed as Assistant Director, International Affairs Department of the Brotherhood of Railway, Airline and Steamship Clerks, Freight Handlers, Express and Station Employees, an affiliate of the Railway Labor Executives' Association. From April 1961 through June 1966 I was employed by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) as Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean. During this period of time I resided in Brazil and Peru and travelled to almost all countries encompassed by my area of responsibility.

The following testimony is based on my personal experience in the field of international labor affairs and on the active affiliation of the RLEA to the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) since 1946. A list of the U.S. unions affiliated with the ITF is attached to the end of my statement.

Our support of Senate bill S. 1779 stems from our strong belief that with proper support the work of organizations like the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) will, indeed, enhance and strengthen the capacity of the other peoples of the world to develop and maintain free, independent societies in their own nations.

CRC, 8/5/2003

THE ITF: ITS HISTORICAL ROLE IN PRESERVING DEMOCRACY

The International Transport workers' Federation (ITF) is an international trade union organization to which bona fide trade unions which uphold democratic principles and have members employed in the transport industry can affiliate. The ITF membership is made up of more than seven million workers, spread throughout 88 countries of the free world, and embraces every type of transport worker without distinction as to race, color or creed.

Its aims are to provide international assistance to its affiliates; generally to defend and promote the economic and social standards of the transport worker; to seek universal recognition of his right to the benefits of trade union membership; to represent the transport worker in international agencies; and to provide its affiliated unions with information and advice.

Its history, which dates from 1896, is almost the longest in international trade unionism; that in itself is testimony to its strength and worth. During that time it has set an unrivalled record as the defender of the transport workers' interests against exploitation by employers and governments alike.

Nations and governments toppled quickly before Hitler's blitzkrieg in the early years of World War II, but more often than not the occupying Nazis soon found that there was a painful gap between a surrender and tasting the fruits of victory. Every dawn uncovered new examples of sabotage.

Members and leaders of European trade unions conceived and executed many of the schemes that helped to turn "Der Fuehrer's" dream of world domination into a horrible nightmare - and no organization was more active in this undertaking than the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).

The ITF carried out a program, with considerable success, whereby seafarers of occupied nations were encouraged to take their vessels to allied ports and turn them over to the democracies. The organization supplied key workers for the underground. It assisted in the sabotage of Nazi transport. It aided the escape of German trade unionists who were being hunted by the Gestapo.

In occupied countries of Europe, German officials often awoke in the morning to find that a dock area was hopelessly clogged with previously unloaded vehicles that couldn't be moved. Their rotors had mysteriously disappeared during the night. A man who helped with that "project" is now one of Europe's most prominent labor leaders.

Comparatively, these and many other activities by the ITF form only one chapter in the federation's nearly 70 years of history. But they contributed greatly to its reputation as a strong, militant force of free transport workers around the world and as a relentless, effective enemy of all types of oppression. The reputation is a deserved one.

An organization of less resilience could not have survived two world wars, world economic depression and the onslaught of a variety of dictatorships.

An organization of less value would not have commanded the loyalty which made survival possible.

AMERICAN RAILWAY LABOR'S INVOLVEMENT IN WORLD AFFAIRS

The Railway Labor Executives' Association became actively involved in international labor affairs, as an affiliate of the ITF, during the crucial days following the end of World War II, particularly in connection with the development and implementation of the Marshall Plan. Thanks to the courageous and invaluable cooperation of transport unions affiliated to the ITF it was possible to maintain the flow of goods and materials shipped under the Marshall Plan to European countries. It was the key role played by the ITF, in spite of the threats of communist sabotage, that assured the success of the Marshall Plan. Since then, American railway labor and other U.S. transportation unions affiliated to the ITF have made considerable human and financial contributions to the outstanding trade union work performed by the ITF in most of the developing nations of the world.

SCOPE OF ITF WORK: RESOURCES AVAILABLE

In spite of the generous contribution of its affiliates in the United States and other parts of the world, the ITF has always found itself groping with the problem of financing its activities. Though the Federation is representative of seven million workers, its own financial resources are insufficient to adequately undertake the tremendous task it faces. In terms of income arising out of affiliation fees, the ITF earns barely enough to maintain a world-wide structure aimed at servicing affiliates in every corner of the globe. A large part of its income goes to the program of regional activities - an effective but modest program designed to lend technical and financial assistance to needy democratic transport unions in developing nations.

Particular emphasis is placed in the areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America, where the ITF maintains regional offices manned by experienced trade unionists.

The ITF representatives travel regularly throughout their respective regions lending assistance to affiliated unions and seeking to enroll new affiliates.

In carrying out their tasks, ITF representatives are often outnumbered and outfinanced. Well-staffed, rich international organizations, sponsored by *certain* church groups and by the International Communist Party, compete openly with the ITF in luring unions and labor leaders to their respective camps. To compound the problem, in some instances church groups are working hand-in-hand with communist-dominated internationals. Yet, the ITF has prevailed.

The sad part of this worthy endeavor is that only a meager \$170,000 is available to cover all of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean! In spite of a rather stringent budget, the ITF has made remarkable progress. Many an emerging nation (Guatemala, the most recent example) struggling to consolidate democratically-elected governments have found the ITF to be of vital assistance in preserving the stability of such governments. In the case of Guatemala, the ITF responsibly cooperated with the authorities in seeking a prompt and fair solution to a serious labor problem which, if left indefinitely unresolved, might have caused the collapse of the very government. I am referring here to the recent 73-day strike involving the U.S.-owned International Railways of Central America (IRCA) and the Guatemalan Railwaymen's Union (SAMF), an ITF affiliate. The strike was settled on March 16 with the ITF playing a key role in the final settlement of the dispute. In the area of development of strong, democratic labor leadership, as opposed to communist-dominated cliques, the ITF has been responsible for the mature leadership heading local and national transport unions today in countries such as Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Indonesia, Senegal, Malaysia, Philippines, Nigeria - among others. The modest input of ITF human and material resources in countries like Mexico, has multiplied itself several fold. In fact, Mexican affiliates of the ITF, especially the Railwaymen's Union, are now lending their valuable technical and financial assistance to other ITF affiliates in Latin America.

This degree of achievement notwithstanding, the work yet to be done staggers the imagination. The problems confronting this type of activity also defy description. And so, with such tremendous tasks at hand, with overwhelming odds against and with very limited financial resources, the work of the ITF must go on.

To illustrate some of the problems facing this bold undertaking, I have selected the area of Latin America where I have personal experience. The ITF spends more in Latin America than in Asia and Africa combined.

THE CHALLENGE FACING THE ITF

In Latin America, as presumably elsewhere in the developing areas of the world, the problem that an international labor organization should ultimately address itself to is the awakening of the workers from their age-long apathy, which was born of servitude, to the advantages of uniting actively for the promotion of their economic welfare. This general goal encompasses, for the international organization, guidance of local unions and national bodies in the essentials of union management and growth, the propagation of union values among the rank-and-file as well as among the unorganized, the development of local and national leaders, and the equipping of these leaders and their organizations with the minimum educational and financial tools for ensuring that they can do an effective job of developing unionism in their own interest and those of communities in which they live. It is, however, the unfortunate fact that four major politico-economic phenomena affecting the societies of the Latin countries of the Western Hemisphere have retarded the progress of democratic unionism. These circumstances, which usurp the attention and energies of international labor organizations, will undoubtedly overshadow the events and activities of Latin American trade unionism over the next few years. These phenomena are:

- a. The military or quasi-military domination of society with attendant repression of such basic freedoms as the right of workers to organize, to bargain collectively, to deny their labor by means of strike to achieve a decent living standard, and the right to educate the workers in the processes of democratic procedures.
- b. The attack by the international communist movement upon new and unsteady union organizations and upon the masses of the unorganized workers to attain the political ends of that disreputable movement.
- c. The deeply-entrenched oligarchy, both of national and foreign origin, which stubbornly refuses to modify its near-feudalist practices, thus enhancing unrest, hatred and subversion.
- d. The ineptness and corruption plaguing several Latin American governments.

national affiliations, has been, is now, and will be several years from now, to bring to bear the moral weight of international democratic unionism and the reprobation of free societies upon the restrictive military juntas. In some instances, this moral pressure has been and will be effective; in other instances such measures are less than effective. In the face of such an obstacle the future of democratic unionism, together with the hopes for improvement in other spheres of society, must await the slow process through which the restlessness of the human spirit will force, pace by pace, one measure of liberalization after another upon oppressors. In some happy instances, this process has been accelerated by universal popular revolution against the military, as in Venezuela, and in these instances, to its everlasting credit, democratic unionism was in the vanguard of the movement toward liberalization. Cuba, on the other hand, is a typical example of the existing danger of violent shifts from extreme right to extreme left. In other well-known instances, Paraguay, Haiti -- and more lately Brazil and Argentina, the working man must suffer for the time in patience. The second problem, that relating to the attempt by the international communist movement to conquer the working man and the trade union organizations for political ends, must be met on a different plane. The communist ideology is now discredited among the societies of developing nations--indications are that several years hence its image will be yet dimmer. Nevertheless, the communists, though stripped of their ideological pretensions, are still bent upon achieving their political ends through subversion, bribery and deception. They still pursue their nefarious designs with ominous success among the corruptible and ingenuous people whom they seek out among the working classes and their leaders in Latin America. The obvious response to this threat is not to rely on international appeals, as in the case of isolated military regimes, but rather to reach to the very roots of the labor movement with the values and demonstrable results of democratic unionism to discredit the communist impostors where they make their appeal--that is, among the illiterate and semi-literate workers and to give these workers the hope of gaining dignity in their labor, economic security for their families and mutual solidarity through their freely elected union representatives.

There is no doubt that the business community in Latin America - including many U.S. firms- will continue its practices to ignore existing labor laws, to apply coercion and economic pressure to discourage trade unions from gathering strength. This, of course, so long as they feel protected by military

governments or, as in many so-called democratic countries, by their friends and counterparts whom they have helped to reach government power. Clearly, this combination of recalcitrant employers and corrupt, ineffectual government administrators is as detrimental to the development of free trade unions as military juntas and communist subversion.

It is, therefore, imperative that unions become stronger, well-organized, self-financed, as in the case of Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela, if both reactionary management and governments are to depart from their present policies of deterring the workers from their goal of attaining social justice.

This process is painstaking and slow; the guiding hands of representatives of democratic international organizations such as the ITF are excruciatingly few. We can hardly hope to completely eliminate this threat within the next few years, but we can and should increase our efforts. The ITF, in particular, should be in the forefront of increasing activity to turn back this threat.

HELP US TO HELP THOSE WHO ARE WILLING TO HELP THEMSELVES

Though the ITF today is the recipient of significant assistance for its educational programs from institutions such as the ILO (International Labor Organization); OAS (Organization of American States); AALC (Afro-American Labor Center) and the AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development), additional funds are urgently needed to carry out basic trade union functions to supplement educational activities. I am referring to programs to organize the unorganized workers; to promote amalgamation of weak unions into single, stronger unions or Federations; to assist unions in the development of community-action projects.

While AIFLD assistance for educational programs - for example - is an important step in the development of free and democratic unions, the inability on the part of the ITF - in many instances - to follow up such educational activities with meaningful organizing work reduces the effectiveness of trade union education.

The combination of trade union education and organizing work is the most effective approach in building and strengthening free trade union institutions in developing countries, led by free individuals who, in turn, can actively participate in concert with other segments of their society in the painstaking process of nation building. Where a union is capable of applying hard self-help measures, the ITF can give the added push toward success. In all ITF programs the quality of self-help is a key factor in helping a union with its own development efforts.

It is in this context where the greatest emphasis for urgent help can be made. The ITF program in the developing areas of the world seeks to build nothing but constructive forces in the transport labor movement which can and do help in developing durable political and economic structures. It is a well known fact that responsible and dynamic ITF affiliates throughout the world have played major roles in helping to preserve the political and economic stability of their governments, recognizing that if they want help they have to start by helping themselves.

Obviously, then, if these efforts are to produce lasting results, the activities of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) in Latin America, as well as in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, must be stepped up to the highest degree possible. In this task, the ITF could use all support and assistance available. Therefore, Federal grants, as contemplated under Senate bill S. 1779 would be of great supplemental assistance in these endeavors.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, and on behalf of the Railway Labor Executives' Association, I strongly urge your committee to report favorably on this bill to establish the International Health, Education and Labor Foundation, which would make Federal grants available to the ITF, and to other international labor organizations, through American unions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

RAILWAY LABOR EXECUTIVES' ASSOCIATION AFFILIATED ORGANIZATIONS

American Railway Supervisors' Association
American Train Dispatchers' Association
Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen
Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees
Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen
Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen
Brotherhood Railway Carmen of America
Brotherhood of Railway, Airline and Steamship Clerks, Freight Handlers,
Express and Station Employees
Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
Hotel & Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union
International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers
International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders,
Blacksmiths, Forgers and Helpers
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
International Brotherhood of Firemen & Oilers
International Organization Masters, Mates & Pilots of America
National Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association
Order of Railway Conductors and Brakemen
Railroad Yardmasters of America
Railway Employees Department, AFL-CIO
Seafarers' International Union of North America
Sheet Metal Workers' International Association
Switchmen's Union of North America
Transportation-Communication Employees Union

INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION AFFILIATES IN THE UNITED STATES

Railway Labor Executives' Association
Seafarers' International Union of North America
The Radio Officers' Union
International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers
Transport Workers' Union of America
National Maritime Union of America
International Organization of Masters, Mates and Pilots
Amalgamated Transit Union
Flight Engineers' International Association
American Radio Association
National Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association
Airline Dispatchers' Association
International Longshoremen's Association